Balancing Effort

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:41

Tonight I want to begin talking about balanced effort or balanced energy. It's a topic that we will all talk about a lot in different ways. Our esteemed associate director Edwin contributed the title, which is "You Don't Pull No Punches, But You Don't Push the River." That's from Van Morrison. So that's what I want to talk about.

In our instructions, both in the hall here and in our interviews, we keep talking about how to have this quality of really relaxed, spacious, open awareness, yet at the same time very precise and alert. We say to summon up tremendous energy to meet each moment, yet at the same time don't do anything. How do we work with this seeming dichotomy, this delicate balance? How do we rest in vivid awakeness, yet at the same time remain very receptive and open, relaxed? Clearly, it's a dance of balance that involves our whole practice, moment to moment.

Tonight I want to talk about it in broad strokes—some aspects that help us to discover and cultivate this quality of balanced energy. I want to focus on two qualities of our experience that can help us over and over to access and recognize this quality of balanced energy: interest and urgency.

When the energy or sense of effort is balanced and strong, it quite naturally gives rise to mindfulness, a quality of simply recognizing, connecting with, and knowing what is present. Moment after moment of mindfulness naturally leads to a deepening of concentration. And all of this naturally leads to wisdom. It's a whole series of the way these factors of mind work together. And in a way it really happens by itself. We can't force any of it.

Looking at the quality of energy or effort—the Pali word is *viriya*, which is variously translated. On one end is heroic, courageous effort. Another way of talking about it is joyous effort, commitment, enthusiasm. It doesn't have to be so intense, but it needs that quality of inner joy and steadiness.

A quality factor of mind that helps us connect naturally with this sense of joyous effort and enthusiasm is that of interest. Really awake, alert, connecting with what's arising quite effortlessly and naturally, moment to moment. Sounds exhausting. Every moment, meeting every moment with this interest, with this kind of joyful alertness—it gets overwhelming even to think about it. It takes so much effort.

But that's where it's just the reverse. The interest itself gives rise to spontaneous effort, spontaneous connection that isn't tiring and isn't difficult. And we all have this capacity. It's an experience that we all have quite frequently in our lives.

If you go to a movie, that's an obvious one. The example I like to use, because I was observing it and to me

it was much more intense, is watching friends—mostly male friends I have to say—watching sports events on TV. Recently, it was the World Cup this summer. A few years ago, I was in San Francisco just at the time of the Super Bowl. That's American football if you're from overseas. I was in San Francisco when the San Francisco team, the 49ers, was playing in the Super Bowl in the old days.

But what amazed me, and where I really zeroed in on this quality of interest leading to such a steadiness of energy and focus, was that everybody I knew in San Francisco—and I know a lot of people in that area—shut down their lives for that day. The whole city shut down to watch this game. Big groups would gather. So I was watching with a group of ten or fifteen people. Incredible focus on every moment of everything that happened. And no one said, "Oh, what a chore. I have to focus on this game." It was spontaneous. It was joyful. I honestly can't remember who won. That shows I wasn't really quite that focused—I was more watching the people.

But you see, it's a quality that we all possess in abundance. And when the interest is there, the energy, the effort, the steadiness of focus springs up quite naturally. It's not a problem.

Now there is one drawback to what I call Super Bowl mind. It's not mindful because it's slightly tinged with a certain quality of craving or desire. There's a payoff that holds the interest. And even when someone says, "Well, I don't care who wins, but I'm watching the artistry of the game"—that's still a payoff. Because if it was just a bunch of schlemiels bumbling around on the field, nobody would be so interested. It has to be a certain level of artistry that gives one that experience of pleasure.

So this isn't wise effort in terms of our practice. It's energy leading to effort that stays interested because it's getting a certain payoff, something we want. Things are going the way we want them to, or we're getting this certain experience of pleasure.

But how come we can't bring this same quality of spontaneous focus to our life, to what's going on here? You'd think our life would be at least as interesting as a football game. But we bring the same tendencies, the same blindnesses to our life outside of here, to our day-to-day, hour-to-hour, moment-to-moment life that we bring to sports or anything else. Some experiences, yes, there's this natural interest and the energy is balanced and we're present. And some experiences don't quite make the grade. We're bringing in our same filters.

The ones we've spoken about so much before—they're not new information. Judging pleasant as good and desirable, unpleasant as something we don't want to be with. Or maybe something is intense enough to hold our interest, but when it's just mundane or not really intense, somehow that interest tends to fall away.

Often people will say in interviews, "Oh, nothing's happening." What do you mean nothing's happening? You sit and nothing happens? "No, well, it's calm. There are sounds, there are sensations, there are emotions, there are thoughts, but nothing very interesting about it. It's not very intense." That's not

nothing happening. That's a lot happening.

Somehow it's as if we think the interest is inherent in what's happening, in the appearance, in the arising object. Some things have it and some things don't. But that's not it at all. The interest comes from within our own experience. As you can see for yourself, sometimes the breath is just the most boring thing you could imagine. And three sittings later, it's just so fascinating, incredible. Do you think the breath is really that different? Probably not. But the quality of interest has led into an energy and effort that leads to mindfulness that really connects.

This tendency in all the different ways that it manifests in our experience—to evaluate what happens, to accept some experiences, to reject others, to be interested in some, to cringe away from others, to ignore others altogether—that's one of the tendencies we keep looking at over and over because it's so insidious. It is often so unconscious, and it surfaces in different and more subtle ways as we continue to explore our experience.

That's the power of the mindfulness we're practicing and this quality of interest that we can cultivate: it's non-discriminating. It's not picking and choosing which experiences to pay attention to, which experiences are worthwhile, which are worthy of our interest, and which are not.

Because when we're picking and choosing, what do we know? The basis on which we're picking and choosing comes from such limitation—from such views and opinions and limiting of our world. Everything's interconnected in ways that we can't even imagine. Sometimes the experience that we find the most mundane or the least interesting—just that one is the potential for opening to a real awakening insight. We can't know how things link together, how things interconnect.

Thich Nhat Hanh says that good and bad are only an idea of the mind. They have no ultimate reality. On this level of meeting whatever arises with interest, with mindfulness, that's true. Evaluating as good and bad is only an idea of the mind, no ultimate reality. That's not to say what Joseph was talking about last night—some experiences are wholesome, they lead to more peace and freedom; some are unwholesome, they contribute to suffering. On another level, that's also true.

As Suzuki Roshi says, there's no such thing as right and wrong. But right is right and wrong is wrong. That's how it works.

On the level of our moment-to-moment experience, however—of what's worth paying attention to—there's no distinction. Every moment of experience, every arising appearance is totally worth being interested in, paying attention to. Because in that moment, that's the expression of our life. It's the manifestation of truth. There's nowhere else we can go to discover truth but in that arising appearance at that moment.

I like the way Thich Nhat Hanh writes and talks about the sense of how we can't separate experience rationally into "this is good" and "this is bad," "this is worthwhile" and "this isn't"—because everything

leads into everything else. If you've read him at all, I'm sure you've encountered the way he can take anything—an empty plate, for instance—and by looking deeply into that plate, with some reflection, he opens up vast realms of understanding. This is reflection, of course, not sense perception in the moment, unless it's a thought. But in looking at that empty plate, we can experience it as a symbol of the finishing of our meal, a moment of gratitude and appreciation for all the cooks who prepared it, for all the farmers who grew the food, for the animals that helped take care of the food, for the people who transported it.

And then also a sense of sadness arises at the fact that many people didn't get to eat anything today. A sense of connection with that. A realization of how many people in the world are dying of starvation at this very moment as we sit here. And realizing that interconnectedness, we might also notice how hard it is to open to our sense of guilt—because one moment we're recognizing our interconnectedness with starving people, and the next moment we're moaning to ourselves because there are no seconds, or wishing we had a cookie.

Just seeing all the play of the mind, and not trying—in terms of mindfulness or interest—to say this one's okay and this one shouldn't be happening. They're all happening together. We can't separate it out.

Again, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, we tend to value a rose and not pay much attention to garbage. But a rose will die and we dump it in the garbage. It becomes garbage. And then we take the garbage and put it into compost and spread it on the flower bed, and it turns into a rose.

It's the same in our meditation here. That moment you felt so guilty about—feeling like "I don't care if people are starving, I really want another Snickers"—that might be the moment that opens us up to some real understanding of ourselves, some real sense of freedom, of disidentification, of not identifying yourself with thought in that moment, of seeing that it all comes and goes. You can't reject anything.

In the space of open, non-discriminating awareness, no experience is more or less interesting, more or less worth our total presence. And if it feels like—as we begin to discover the interrelatedness—sometimes there's a lot of shadow stuff, a lot of hard things to be with, a lot of difficult experience, or even more, a lot of just really mundane, not very interesting experience at all—still, this balanced perception, this seeing of interrelatedness, can come about partly through reflection. What I was describing with Thich Nhat Hanh is really reflection. But through our interested meeting of experience moment to moment, we begin to perceive things in that way quite naturally, without reflection. It becomes the natural perception of how things are.

A poem that reflects this, by a woman named Izumi Shikibu—a Japanese poet from the imperial court, around the tenth century:

Although the wind blows terribly here,
the moonlight also leaks between the roof planks
of this ruined house.

To me, that really feels like practice. The moon also leaks between the roof planks of this ruined house. That's how my mind feels a lot—like a ruined house. And somehow the moon manages to leak through when we're willing to be with the ruined house.

When there's that quality of non-discriminating interest, the energy, the effort, the willingness to be present with mindfulness becomes effortless. It's balanced.

The trick, of course, is how to sustain this quality of interest without the payoff—without somehow thinking, "Okay, I'll be interested for a certain amount of time, but then something big needs to happen to keep me interested." How do we sustain this quality without the payoff? It's not simple.

One tool—and it's only one tool among many—is this quality of spiritual urgency. I've found it tremendously useful both in times of difficulty, when the mind just wants to cringe back and turn away from what's going on, and maybe even more so in those times of seemingly endless mundane experience. The times when you're just thinking, "Why am I doing this? What possible relationship does the sensation in my big toe when I lift my foot have to anything that matters in my life? What am I doing this for?"

I hit that point around the second or third week of every retreat I do. At some point, it just eludes me—what I'm doing and why.

This quality of spiritual urgency is very profound and very strong. It comes about from really opening to the suffering aspect of our lives, of the world. Not drowning in it, but really opening our eyes, opening our heart, looking around us, inside us.

This sort of wakes us up to the point where we see the confusion, the pain, the suffering in our own experience—the unsatisfactoriness, the inevitability of death, of sickness.

So at some point, and over and over again, the urgency to understand, to be free from confusion, to be helpful to other beings—whatever form it takes for you—at some point that becomes more important than hanging out in our comfort zone, than living a life of denial. Which actually feels like a comfort zone, but it's not so comfortable at all. We're just not really looking at it.

At times this quality of spiritual urgency can be called up consciously. At other times it arises quite spontaneously, simply by opening our eyes and looking around.

When we don't have spiritual urgency, when we're just going through the motions of practice without that sense of interest which the urgency can inspire—even though your practice might seem really right on, very meticulous, even though you're not just going through the motions but really being very careful, and it feels like you're putting in a lot of effort—it's sort of meeting an outside model. Whether it's the model of how things should look or the model in your own mind, the motivation is trying to match some expectation you have, or you think someone else has, rather than arising from the inner urgency, the inner interest in your own heart. It doesn't quite work. You can practice in a meticulous way and it gets

drier and tougher and you're dragging along. It can be torturous. And you can't quite figure out what's going on, what's missing, because it seems like you're doing everything just right.

I had an experience of this. A few years ago, I came here to sit a two-month retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita. I was really up for it. But the day before the retreat, I talked to my mother, and she told me she'd just found out she had cancer and was going to have an operation. She had breast cancer and uterine cancer, both, and was going to have an operation within the week. She refused to let me come home. She said, "No, no, you must do your retreat. I don't want you to come home." She got really adamant about it, which isn't like her.

So I came and did the retreat. I would call home every day, and things were going fine. It wasn't an emergency operation or anything. She was doing fine. And I was practicing extremely meticulously. I was noting every moment. I thought I was really present. But it was getting drier and deader. It just felt like sawdust. It felt like I was dragging myself through it. But I thought my effort was really right there, really present.

I didn't quite wake up to what was going on until one day, after about three weeks. I always used to walk in the same place in the hall in the Catskills. I was walking up the stairs to my walking place, and this thought arose—it was more than a thought, it was like a real conviction: "If somebody's walking there, I'm leaving the retreat. That's it." And I meant it. That's what was scary. I really hoped somebody was walking there. Of course nobody was.

That sort of woke me up. I thought, what's going on here? What's the story? Because that just wasn't a moment of aversion. That was really a kind of deep-seated response to the quality of energy and effort that was going on.

What was happening was that I wasn't really wholeheartedly present in my energy, in my effort. It looked like it. It even looked like it to me. I was meeting the form which I knew from the past, trying to meet my expectations of what it's supposed to be like. I could do it and I thought I meant it. But somehow—and this is strange, because you'd think the quality of urgency would be stronger given what was going on—basically what was happening is that my mind, my interest, was split.

I wasn't using the fact of my mother's sickness to bring up urgency and put that urgency into my practice. I was simply splitting my attention, worried about my mother and not wholeheartedly present, moment to moment. I could put on a good show for myself, but it was all directed outward. That inner spring of urgency and interest wasn't there.

We can carry it so far and really feel like it's balanced effort, but at some point that's just not going to hold. We can't keep doing it. It withers the heart.

On the other hand, when the energy, the interest is present and balanced, it becomes the payoff in itself. The times I've felt most connected and balanced and present and really joyful in practice don't have

anything to do with what was actually happening—whether it was pleasant or unpleasant, incredibly intense and insightful or just everyday stuff. But this quality of real, alive connectedness had everything to do with that balanced energy and effort that was wholeheartedly present, meeting what was happening moment to moment without evaluation, without resistance. When the effort, the energy is in that balanced groove, whatever's happening isn't a problem. The interest is there, and that's enough. That carries us.

I want to read something from Krishnamurti, a way of talking about this quality of wholehearted interest and attention: "When you look totally, you will give your whole attention, your whole being, everything of yourself—your eyes, your ears, your nerves. You will attend with complete self-abandonment. And then there is no room for fear, no room for contradiction, and therefore no conflict."

Can we attend to whatever's arising with complete self-abandonment? Our nerves, our ears, our eyes, everything of ourselves. That's the quality of really alert, interested energy that isn't looking for something special to happen. In that space, the urgency is there. We don't need to reflect on it. We don't need to look for it. Things are in balance.

Without this wholeheartedness, the energy flags. If things are difficult, there's that tendency for the mind to fall back, cringe away, shrink down. Remember Joseph was talking last night about how we can confuse sloth with compassion. Sloth is sort of like an absence of energy. In moments when the energy, the effort is strong and balanced, you can experience what it's like: the mind is bright, clear, and interested. Energy has the quality of patience, of being willing to be with suffering or difficulty without that cringing back.

This is the tendency of the mind when there's no energy—when something difficult comes, we recoil. And if there's too much difficulty, one thing after another without energy, we just wither down, like a sopping twisted towel. "I just can't be with this anymore."

Energy, as Sayadaw U Pandita says, is a support in the mind, sort of like the support of a house. It supports the mind to stop flinching away from what is unpleasant, to open and be bright and meet it again with this quality of interest and presence.

So you can see why that first initial shrinking back, if we say, "Oh no, I must be kind to myself, this is really the way to balance"—they say when it's difficult we need to pull back, which is true sometimes, and I'll speak to that later. But this shrinking back is a sign. This is what Chögyam Trungpa called idiot compassion. Don't take the first sign of shrinking back as necessarily the sign that you need to pull back altogether, because that's just the natural response of the mind to something unpleasant. If there's interest, if there's energy, that will be a support where we can come back and meet it again.

As you see, energy isn't static—certainly not. It's a quality that comes and goes. It's also something we can easily identify with. So when it comes: "I'm doing really well now." And when it drops: "Somehow I've blown it. Big mistake. I've got to fix it somehow." This can lead to tipping out of balance either way—the

cringing back and giving up, or, and this happens even more with most of the people I talk to, when the energy drops we think it's our fault. We push harder. Things still aren't the way we want them to be, so we push even harder.

And it's not actually interest or mindfulness or wise effort. It's totally trying to make things be a certain way. It's desire or expectation masquerading as wise effort.

Except the effect isn't one of bright, alert interest. It's one of frustration, self-judgment, tightness, more tightness, more heaviness, more grimness until we're just really tied in a knot.

It can be very subtle. Sometimes it's incredibly blatant, but sometimes it's very subtle—the way that we think we're meeting what's arising with interest. But if you look at the underlying intention, it's "I'll meet this in order for it to open up, in order for things to start flowing again, in order for that bright interest to come back"—a long, long list of whatever we're hoping for.

In either case, it can lead to that kind of loss of interest that just makes us say, "Who cares?" Back to that place of "I don't care what happens. I lift my foot, I put my foot down, I feel tingling, I feel pressure. So what?"

This is the time to open our hearts and minds to the quality of spiritual urgency. Now, urgency is not panic. It's not fear and desperation. But again, it's getting in touch with that motivation for why we came to this retreat, for why we're engaged in spiritual practice—the urgency of that. Getting in touch with that motivation where opening to truth is more important than anything else in our life at that moment. It encompasses everything in our life; it doesn't shut something out.

Nisargadatta Maharaj said—I'm paraphrasing—something along the lines of: if you deeply want to be free, to understand your true nature, you will be. But you must be honest with yourself and really want nothing else. That's the quality of spiritual urgency. It gives courage. It gives interest. It gives this motivation and willingness to meet and explore and investigate whatever particular experience is getting thrown up at us. It gives us the courage and the interest to come out of denial over and over and over.

And we don't really have to sit and ruminate about it. All we have to do is open up our eyes, our ears, our hearts. Just pay attention to our experience for any short period of time without that evaluating and pushing things away. And the truth of impermanence, of the unsatisfactoriness of things, of the suffering that's within and around us—we can't escape it. We might want to. That's the denial we're coming out of.

This is from Chinul, who is the father of Korean Zen. He says, "The world is blazing in torments as if it were a house on fire. How can you bear to linger here and complacently undergo such long suffering? If you wish to avoid suffering, there's no better way than to seek Buddhahood." He goes on to say, though, "Understand that the Buddha is the mind. People do not recognize that their own minds are the true Buddha. They want to search for the Buddha, yet they will not observe their own minds."

It's a strong statement, but to me it encapsulates this quality of urgency. When urgency is awakened, there's no problem paying attention. We don't have to look for interest—it comes naturally.

One of my teachers uses the same metaphor of the house on fire, and the Buddha used this one also. My teacher says if you were somewhere and someone came and told you that your house was on fire, you'd immediately start going home. And if on the way you ran into a friend you hadn't seen for a long time, you wouldn't say, "Oh, let's stop and have a cappuccino—there's this nice little place open." You don't have to stop and ponder, "Well, should I? It would be nice."

I haven't had a cappuccino for a while. No, no. You don't stop, and it doesn't even arise as a possibility. You just say, "Sorry, the house is on fire, I'm going home." That's the energy, the one-pointed interest that comes from urgency. Our house is on fire, and we are home. So it would behoove us to wake up and pay attention—discover what the fire is and how we can quench the flames. That's our practice.

And we're not going to discover it by shutting our eyes and putting on some nice music and pretending it'll just go away. It won't just go away. It doesn't mean we have to get lost in despair. As with everything, there's a balance. But we do need to wake up, and all we have to do is keep paying attention. When we have that urgency, when we're confronted face to face with the fact that our house is on fire, again, the interest, the energy, the mindfulness, the understanding comes quite without effort.

I'll give you an example because it really shows how the difference in understanding comes from that sense of awakeness, from urgency, not from the situation. I don't know if you saw a couple of years ago on Bill Moyers' special where he was exploring different kinds of things with the mind, and one segment featured Jon Kabat-Zinn's stress reduction course in Worcester. The profound effects on people who are sent to this stress reduction course at UMass Hospital, who have come to the end of what formal medicine can do for them—they're all either in extreme ongoing chronic pain, life-threatening illnesses, daily migraine headaches, whatever. And how simple mindfulness practice, coming only once a week and doing a 45-minute tape of mindfulness every day, that's all they're doing, has these profound effects.

Well, ten years ago, when I was managing here, myself, my other co-manager, and another dear friend who was cooking here—actually it was during a course with Sayadaw U Pandita, that one Joseph talked about, where the whole atmosphere was very tense. As tense as it was for the yogis, I want you to know for the staff it was ten times more tense. It was a difficult time. So we picked this time to go as interns to the stress reduction course, which means the three of us would drive in, take the course, do everything that the people in the course do. That was basically it, and talk a little bit about it after.

So we would fly in in the morning, an hour's drive, do this course, fly home, then do a staff meeting all afternoon—it was on that day. These people, in three weeks they're reporting experiences like, "I had a migraine every day for six years and now I haven't had one for two weeks." And all kinds of amazing stuff, really profound openings, understanding their life in another way. We, meanwhile, would fall asleep during the meditations. I mean, literally—I remember my friends snoring on the floor. We'd kind of be

looking at our watch. We'd go flying home through traffic, would come back at least half the time with splitting headaches, move into the staff meeting and just be going, "Please, just let me out of this meeting." It was stressing us out enormously. And we definitely went in with a little cockiness: "Well, we know this mindfulness gig."

It was really interesting. We would try to do the meditations at home, just as instructed. Have you—the first couple weeks, you'd lie down and do a kind of mindful moving through your body, starting at your feet. I don't think I ever got higher than my knee without falling asleep in the whole time. And the same with both of my friends. I mean, it was really pathetic. And as the weeks went on, eight weeks, profound changes in these people. Because they had a real urgency. The truth of things was hitting them. They couldn't avoid it. And it led to a natural effort and exploration and wisdom. And we were just in your basic arrogant denial, so to speak. I actually learned more about it later as I've reflected on it.

What I'm sharing now is that I really see how easy it is to be complacent, to take things for granted, to think, "Well, we've looked at suffering. We've looked at dukkha. We're meeting it every day." Yes, we're meeting it every day, but are we actually looking at it? Are we actually opening to it? That's another question altogether. It's so easy to be complacent.

After my mother had cancer that time, after I finally woke up in my practice, it really did inspire a sense of urgency, a deep opening to all of our impermanence and death, a real kind of cellular experience of dying. And then she got better. She's been fine for five years. And complacency rises. "Oh yeah, my mom's fine. I'm fine. Everything's fine. There's no problem." It's hard to stay open to the unsatisfactory nature, to the fact that our house is on fire.

But it's worth it. Freedom, the real connectedness that comes out of it, the real aliveness—it's worth it, rather than living kind of shut off and dead and denying.

So we can use anything. Just notice what's happening. God knows. Just pay attention through the sittings and walkings in the day. You don't have to look any further. Notice how you're meeting the difficult and unpleasant. Is it a mistake? Is it something to get rid of? Or is it an inspiration to say, "Yes, this is how this life is. Do I want to just keep wandering in samsara? Or do I want to explore what's happening in order to wake up?"

We can just use nature. All the chipmunks squashed on the road—there are a lot of chipmunks this year. We've all been talking about it. It seems like we can't even drive down the driveway without six chipmunks darting out. It's really quite tricky.

Or when I go to my doctor at UMass, I really like going because it's a big teaching hospital. There are so many people I pass in so many stages—children with chronic diseases, old people seeming kind of bewildered and confused, lots of fear in people's faces. Sometimes there's a real spark of beauty and love as somebody connects or sees the fear and reaches out. It's a very alive time for me. I really use it to wake

up to the fact that there's nothing to be complacent about. What am I waiting for to pay attention? Am I waiting until something really horrible happens again? Or am I waiting for something interesting enough to be worth paying attention to? The mundane is just fine. We can wake up with that as well as with anything.

The difficult experiences you go through here—it doesn't have to be life-threatening angst. It can be the frustration of pushing too hard. That can be enormous suffering when we don't see what's going on. Any kind of overwhelming suffering, that is a great time to see what's really going on and let the urgency come up.

Someone today, in an interview, expressed this really beautifully. It really touched me. She'd been going through a very difficult time, to the point that all of us reach at times where it just feels like, "I don't know if I can handle this." That does happen. She was at the lake looking at the leaves drifting here and there in the water, just thinking, "Do I want to live like that? Just tossed back and forth, back and forth?" And the answer was clearly, no, I don't. It doesn't make everything okay.

It doesn't make the suffering go away. It doesn't bring clear bliss. All the suffering is still there. But that sense of *no, I don't want to live that way*—it's worth coming back and being with this. Paying attention.

In fact, you don't even have to go that far. The attention, the interest, the urgency—it just arises naturally. And there's the energy again to meet what's happening for another moment. For another moment. And we only have to take it one moment at a time. We don't have to think, "Oh no, this and three more days of this—it's unbearable." That might be in your mind, but it's only this. It's only this moment. We have no idea what's going to happen in the next moment.

Sometimes the most difficult moments—when we've just thought, "I've had it. This is it. I cannot face another moment of this"—and then we face the next moment. And you never know, that can be the transformative moment where we really just open to something much greater and more profound than our fear and aversion of the difficult.

I want to read this poem about just that—sometimes the most difficult moments are the moments of our awakening. This is from one of the women who was a nun with the Buddha at the time of the Buddha. This is a book of different poems from those women. Her name was Sama, and it's said that for twenty-five years her mind was always distracted while meditating. Two weeks isn't so hard, folks. And she was a nun, mind you, so she wasn't doing much else.

This is her poem:

It was twenty-five years since I turned away from home and I hadn't had a moment's peace. I had no peace because I didn't know my own mind. Then suddenly I was shaken with dread, remembering the words of the Conqueror—that's the Buddha—*because of the pain of things, I love to be alert. I have finished with craving. The Buddha's teaching has been done. It is the seventh day since my craving died.*

That's a way they have of talking about awakening—saying, "I've finished with craving, seventh day." *Beca use of the pain of things, I love to be alert.*

So it took her twenty-five years. Maybe it won't take us so long to realize that we can be alert no matter what's going on. And again, this alertness, this energy that comes from urgency—it's a balanced quality of connection and effort. Not desperation, not fear, not panic. When we're meeting difficult or not difficult experience in this balanced way, it naturally leads to balanced perception, where the difficult opens also into the sublime. And that's why we don't despair. That's what lets us have the energy to come back and meet the next difficult experience.

But sometimes we can tip out of balance and really feel that we're drowning in despair. We feel we're really open to the fact that our house is on fire and we see no way out, and it just feels like we really can't bear it. That's when the energy is beginning to tip out of balance.

This is from Anna Akhmatova, a Russian poet, written in 1921, just at the height of all the terrors and starvation and war of the Russian Revolution:

Everything is plundered, betrayed, sold. Death's great black wing scrapes the air. Misery gnaws to the bone. Why then do we not despair? By day, from the surrounding woods, cherries blow summer into town. At night, the deep transparent skies glitter with new galaxies. And the miraculous comes so close to the ruined, dirty houses. Something not known to anyone at all, but wild in our breast for centuries.

That's why we don't despair. But sometimes we lose sight of the miraculous coming close to our dirty houses.

And we do despair. We can feel like we're falling into a great black hole or drowning in suffering—whatever the suffering, whatever the experience. Or we turn it into that kind of effort that's pushing, pushing, pushing, and then blaming ourselves because things aren't the way we think they should be, and the only way to remedy it is certainly to try harder, to make it be a certain way. Again, subtly mistaking balanced effort for wanting things to change.

At this point of despair, when we're overwhelmed perhaps by the strength and intensity and ongoing nature of suffering—whether it's terror or grief or this tight, tight pushing or fear or sadness, it doesn't matter what it is—but when it's just more than the mindfulness can meet, more than there can be a balance of perception, then our mind and heart really does wither. We really do tip off into a genuinely unbalanced quality of presence, quality of effort, where we can just get really lost.

Again, this is the place where it's not just that cringing back of sloth, but where it's really skillful means to pull back a little from what's happening. Because in our trying to meet what's happening with what we're thinking is wise effort, we're getting tighter and more forceful and grimmer and heavier. I just want to make it clear that grimness is not equivalent to wise effort. The grimmer you are doesn't mean the more mindful you are or the better you're doing. Sometimes people really ask, "Is it allowed to smile?" It is

allowed to smile. It helps a lot sometimes to smile.

So if you find that you're falling into that, or even worse, that you just feel like you're drowning in a swirl of pain and confusion—that is the time when balance means back off. Instead of trying to drill a hole through that experience, instead of trying to meet it by God with openness (just listen to the tone of voice of that intention), it's skillful to back off, turn the attention elsewhere. Bring up what Thich Nhat Hanh calls seeds of joy, seeing that maybe you're not noticing the balance of perception, but you can deliberately bring it up.

For me, sometimes when I'm walking up in the castles, I'll just go stay on the fire escape on the second floor and look at the sky and the trees. Just open up to seeing, to hearing, to nature. It brings a spaciousness to the heart, to the mind, to the consciousness. See what it is for you. It might be just sitting and opening to hearing. It might mean going down and sitting by the lake. It might mean reading an inspiring passage—whatever brings up seeds of joy.

This is not cheating. It's not giving in. It's not being a wimp. And when you're in that pushing phase and judging it, you're not going to be able to trust whatever evaluation you make of your practice. So at that point the thought will come up, "Maybe I should back off, open to hearing," and immediately you think, "No way. That's just giving in. That's just being a coward. That's just sloth. That's just idiot compassion." You can't trust the evaluations when you're caught in judgment.

So just look: if there's no mindfulness, if you're withering your heart, withering your mind, turn the attention somewhere else. Bring up seeds of joy. Take a walk. Do whatever helps to bring a sense of spaciousness and happiness into your experience. Maybe it's doing loving-kindness practice—whatever it is for you. This is skillful means. This is how to balance. And again, once there's that sense of openness, of spaciousness, even just that much, then the reconnection can come again. The natural interest and sense of the urgency of things can arise, and we can come back and maybe meet that difficulty just for a moment in a more balanced, open way.

So that's just broad strokes of this balance of energy that we work with moment to moment to moment. It's an ongoing dance. It's never static. We never get to, "Okay, this is it. Now I can forget about it and coast." Sorry.

I'll end with a quotation from Nyoshul Khenpo Rinpoche: "Those who recognize their true nature are enlightened. Those who ignore or overlook it are deluded. This recognition is the borderline between Buddhas and beings, and this recognition is the great crossroads at which we find ourselves every moment of our lives."

Every moment. It doesn't have to be daunting. It's a wonderful opportunity. Every moment is the crossroads between recognizing our true nature or not.

So, let's sit for a few moments.

Thank you for listening.

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